Week 1: Moore's Proof of the External World

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1 Some Preliminaries

I just want to say a few things about analytic philosophy, both as a method and subject. As an undergraduate my university split philosophy majors into two tracks: problems track and history track. The former involved courses in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics; those taking the later track studied ancient, medieval and modern philosophy. There is of course overlap: the historians dealt with philosophical problems over history; the problems track folks still studied the way arguments in, for example, metaphysics developed. And while this history/problems division is a nice way of partitioning the subject, there are other dimensions one can consider as well. One of these is methodology. Putting these three together gives us a nice picture of what PH221 involves.

On one hand, analytic philosophy is like a history track course: you could call it 'contemporary' or '20th Century' philosophy since it covers the major philosophers of this time period. On another hand, it is like a problems track course because it covers (primarily) philosophy of language and metaphysics. But Foad is right when he says taking PH221 will make you smarter. Properly speaking, it will enable you to better assess arguments. This is where the methodology side comes in. The analytic method has been very successful in dissolving, solving and settling arguments. This is the method you are implicitly taught in your other philosophy courses at the LSE. In a sense then PH221 is like analytic method boot-camp. You really spend a lot of time honing your argumentative and critical skills in ways that you can apply to your other philosophy courses (or in your career).

And finally, because analytic philosophy deals with foundational issues in philosophy, much of the content (as opposed to method) you learn in PH221 is also applicable to other courses and other philosophical problems. I work on exploitation, a topic that you find in, for example, courses dealing with public policy and applied ethics. Yet I'm teaching analytic—odd right? Not really. Because the conceptual analysis of exploitation that I engage in relies on a lot of lessons from philosophy of language. Indeed, the meta-philosophical question of whether and when such conceptual analysis is valid is one I must grapple with and this is something we cover in PH221.

2 Moore's Proof of the External World

2.1 Proof

Moore's argument is as follows:

1. Here is one hand. $(\exists x)Hx$

2. Here is another hand. $(\exists y)(Hy \wedge \neg(y = x))$

3. If there are hands, then there are external things. $(\exists x)Hx \rightarrow (\exists z)Ez$

C$_1$. Therefore, there exist some external things. $\vdash (\exists z)Ez$

2.2 Critique of Moore

Moore claims to establish the existence of a mind-independent world, which is a refutation to (the then orthodox metaphysical position) absolute idealism. But, although it is valid *prima facie* there is something odd about the argument. Though the argument seems unsatisfying or unconvincing, it is difficult to explain why this is the case. But if the oddness amounts to the claim that the argument is not sound, and, since it is clear that the argument is valid, it must be the case that one of the premises is false.

Which premise could be false? Let's consider the argument again. Premise 1: here is one hand. This premise seems true. Premise 2: here is another hand. Surely, if we accept 1, we also accept 2. Premise 3: If there are hands, then there are external things. This premise seems to be the place to concentrate our attention. Let's assume then, that if there is a false premise it is 3. How might 3 be false? Well, hands might not be external things. After all, the hands I hold up in a dream are *not* mind-independent external things. That there is something in front of me that I call a hand is not evidence for external things. It seems that what we want is to add a sub-premise to 3 that, once expressed, clarifies the argument's unconvincing nature. consider:

3.′ If there are hands and hands are external things, then there are external things. $(\exists x)(Hx \wedge Ex) \rightarrow (\forall z)(z = x \rightarrow Ez)$

Now, we might also want to build this claim that hands are external things in to premises 1 and 2 in order to make the claims of those premises explicit. In such a case, we would also focus on the truth of 1 and 2. But for now, let's leave it as is and focus on 3′. So, the claim is that the original 3 is false and when amended to 3′ it is true, but then the argument is no longer valid. And, in order to establish the argument's validity, we must add premise 0:

0. Hands are external things.

But premise 0 presupposes the existence of the external world, which is just what the argument is trying to establish. Therefore, it seems, Moore's argument is question begging.

2.3 Moore's Rejoinder

That Moore. What a horrible philosopher. And yet...this too seems too quick. Moore and Russell ushered in a whole new approach to philosophy and others quickly followed suit. Yet, above, it seems we've destroyed Moore's shift away from British idealism in a half a page. Can it be that we've seen something missed by Moore, Russell and, in fact, the broader philosophical community at the time? By the principle of charity, we must assume that there is something more to Moore's argument. What could this be?

Moore has responded that his argument is against the *Idealist*, not the *skeptic*. In order to motivate the possible falsity of the original 3, we argued that it is, after all, possible that we are dreaming. This is a skeptical move. We do not actually believe that it is true that we are dreaming. Thus—if we don't help ourselves to a skeptical move—our common sense tells us that, in fact, we actually believe 3 to be true in its original form. But if this is the case, then premises 1, 2, and 3 are all true and valid, thus the argument is sound. Then, in this case, the oddness of the argument is not, as originally claimed, caused by the unsoundness of the argument.

Perhaps the argument sounds odd because it is not a 'rigorous proof'; that is, although it is technically sound, it is, in some way too trivial. Moore counters this objection, claiming his argument is rigorous because:

- The premises are different from the conclusion.

- The conclusion really follows from the premises.

- The premises are known with certainty to be true.

But hold on..., the third claim seems to give us license to use the skeptical argument on 3 because we need to know if it is, indeed, true that we know 3 with certainty. It seems that if we know something with certainty we cannot doubt it. The invitation to consider whether 3 is known with certainty invites the skeptic back in. So here it seems that if Moore wants to ban the skeptical move, then his proof lacks rigor; if he allows the skeptical move, then it fails for the reason outlined in the first critique above. Either way it seems that Moore's rejoinder fails.

2.4 Another Rejoinder

Let's try another (but related) tack. Our skeptical argument above ran as follows:

4. If I don't know that I'm not dreaming ($\neg P$), then I don't know that my hand is really mind-independent ($\neg Q$).

5. I don't know that I'm not dreaming ($\neg P$).

C_2. Therefore, I don't know that my hand is really mind-independent ($\neg Q$).

$$P \quad \rightarrow \quad Q$$
$$P$$

$$Q$$

You may recognise the form of this argument from your logic course. It is *modus ponens*. Moore's move, which is called the Moorean shift, is to transform the argument's form into *modus tollens*.

$$P \quad \rightarrow \quad Q$$
$$\neg Q$$

$$\neg P$$

And translated into the context of the proof of the external world, the Moorean shift produces the following:

4. If I don't know that I'm not dreaming ($\neg P$), then I don't know that my hand is really mind-independent (Q).

5′ I know that my hand is really mind-independent. ($\neg Q$)

C$_3$ Therefore, I know that I'm not dreaming. ($\neg\neg P$, i.e. P)

Again, here we seem to be circularly assuming mind-independence in 5′. But is this *really* a question-begging assumption, as we concluded above? In order to answer that question, let's look at another question first: Is it really true that rigorous proofs must include premises that are known with *certainty* to be true? Perhaps this is the gold standard, but surely if the premises are known with near-certainty to be true, then the proof is, although not perfectly rigorous, very near it. If this is the case, then we might accept something less demanding than certainty. So, although we do not know with certainty that 3 is true, it does seem that it is more likely than the alternatives. Premise 3 is an instance of what is now called a "Moorean fact".

A Moorean fact, as stated by David Lewis, is "one of those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary." So, if Q from 5′ (i.e. My hand is really mind-independent) is a Moorean fact, then we know Q better, that is, have better evidence for Q, than we have for any of the premises of an argument against Q. Arguments like "I am dreaming, so my purportedly mind-independent hand might not really be mind-independent." In general, when faced with: The claim Q is a Moorean fact iff Q is the claim we know best. And this, Moore claims, is the case for 5′. So, although it is possible to doubt 5′, we know it better than any of the premises to any skeptical argument that may be advanced against it. Therefore, although we cannot be *certain* of the truth of 5′, the evidence we have for 5 is great enough to make the proof of the existence of the external world a rigorous proof.

$$
\begin{array}{ccc}
 & & \text{X} \\
 & \text{or} & \text{Y} \\
\text{Q} & & \text{Z} \\
\hline
\text{Q} & & \neg Q
\end{array}
$$

Thus, it seems that Moore's argument is, in fact, a proof of the external world. It sounds odd simply because we know it *could* be false. The skeptic's response is very easy to formulate and, since the idealist is going to take the skeptical route, it is easy to see what she can say in response to Moore. As it turns out, Moore's argument is an argument from common sense. We know Q in 5′ better than we know any other premise, therefore, Q is admissible, thus, the skeptical response is *inadmissible*. The Moorean shift shows the skeptic's responses to be misguided. When we return to the original proof and omit the skeptical response, it turns out that the argument is successful.

2.5   The Final Word?

But is it? What is the status of a Moorean fact? Consider the claim D: 'This desk is mostly solid matter.' I have better evidence for D than I have for any of the myriad claims of theoretical physics that would allow me to establish the true claim $\neg D$: 'This desk is mostly empty space.' But we know that $\neg D$ is true, despite the weakness–or individual implausibility of–the premises that establish it. In fact, the plausibility of these premises is increased because of the overlapping and holistic nature of these premises.

But some non-Morean facts seem more acceptable than others. For example, on the question of the solidity of the desk, we can test the premises. It is, however, unclear how we might test metaphysical questions like the questions as to whether there is a mind independent world. We will encounter similar sentiments when we cover positivism later this term.

And one last thing, which I'll you can consider on your own. Analisa Coliva points out (in the article on Moodle) that a skeptic is not an advocate of idealism. The skeptic is an *agnostic*. Thus, the existence of a mind-independent hand is neither more, nor less probable than the possibility of dreaming. For the best possible sceptic the Moorean fact is not possible in this context. I'll leave you to read the Coliva paper and to consider whether you agree with her, quite interesting, assessment of Moore's argument!